

Getting reacquainted with Germany's reunited capital

BOOMING BERLIN

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The last time I visited Berlin, graffiti-covered walls, guard towers, barbed wire and a swath of no man's land still separated the city into halves like the dark and light sides of the moon. That was more than two decades ago, and a trip into East Berlin was still a chilling reminder of how different life could be depending on where one happened to be born.

I had visited the former German capital several times as a child, enjoying the thrill of riding the overnight Berlin Duty Train through the East German corridor, the subway underneath East Berlin past bricked-up stations and the lofty view of the still war-ravaged city from the upper deck of a double-decker bus.

For my parents it was a way of giving us kids a living history lesson and a personal look at how they had met when my father was stationed there as an American Soldier in the postwar years. In retrospect I'm sure it was a sometimes

painful journey back for my mother to a place where she had lost a large part of her childhood while trying to survive in a world ruled by Nazis, Allied bombing raids that blew her house apart and Russian retaliation at the end of World War II.

But for my brother, sister and me — and later for my wife — trips to Berlin were exhilarating. West Berlin was a vibrant oasis full of individuals who refused to acknowledge they were surrounded by a repressive regime that constantly threatened their way of life. With a palpable sense of tension and freedom in the air, Berliners had a way of letting you know they greatly appreciated their luck at ending up on the western side of the Wall and the unceasing vigilance provided by the Allies during the Cold War years.

Now nearly 15 years after the fall of the Wall it was my turn to try to explain to my children what occurred in Berlin during World War II and in the years following. There's nothing like an 8-year-old's questions about



One of the few remaining pieces of the Berlin Wall stands as a piece of modern artwork at Potsdamer Platz.

the "whys" for such things as the Holocaust and the memorials to those executed while trying to flee East Berlin to put things into perspective.

Having found accommodations just across the street from the Zoo train station, we couldn't have asked for a better way to start our three-day exploration of Germany's restored capital after our four-hour train ride from Frankfurt. From our fifth-floor hotel room we could view the bombed remnants of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Memorial Church surrounded by the bustle of tourists, shoppers and commuters on the Kurfürstendamm — Berlin's premier shopping district.

Welcome Card

Our first stop was at the Tourist Information Office in the train station to pick up a Welcome Card 2004. The booklet, which cost €21, includes a ticket valid for all public transportation for one adult and up to three children for 72 hours, and a slew of percentage-off vouchers for everything from museums to boat cruises, theater offerings to sightseeing tours. The Welcome Card also includes descriptions of various sights in the city and a map of all the U- and S-Bahn lines in and around Berlin.

Not having been in Berlin for more than 20 years, I wasn't sure what to expect. I knew the city had been one huge construction site for years as the two halves were slowly knitted back together, but the extent of the new buildings and reconstruction was breathtaking. Where once

empty, bricked-up buildings had stood adjoining barbed wire fences and no man's land, now huge, modern corporate buildings dominated the skyline.

From the vantage of an open-topped, double-decker sightseeing bus making its way back and forth between the former East and West sides of Berlin it was even hard to tell where the Wall had once stood. Although a few slabs of the Wall still remain as a reminder of recent history and for tourist snapshots, they are quickly being overshadowed by the seemingly never-ending construction of new buildings.

Nowhere is the contrast between the old and the new more apparent than in the Reichstag. With its massive stone walls and modern glass interior and dome, Germany's Parliament serves as synthesis of the past and the present — a grim reminder of the rise of National Socialism and the building's destruction in 1933, and a tribute to German reunification and the end of the Cold War a decade and a half ago.

Nearby is another symbol of this synthesis — the Brandenburg Gate, built by Frederick the Great as a symbol of German nationalism through which Nazi soldiers marched to declare their dominance, and that was encircled by fences and barriers during the Cold War. These days it's just another stop among many during a sightseeing tour of the city.

While most cities have their share of cultural land-

marks, recreational parks and museums to explore, Berlin offers nearly double of everything. Because the city was divided into separate entities for more than four decades, visitors today will still find a mirror image in both halves — from opera houses to national galleries, zoos to thriving city centers (Alexanderplatz versus the Kurfürstendamm). And then of course there are even newer cosmopolitan centers which sprang up after the Wall fell such as the shopping and cultural attractions at Potsdamer Platz with its huge Sony Center and Daimler City.

Berlin is a city of bridges — there are nearly 2,000 — and waterways — about 190 kilometers. A boat ride on the Spree River gives one a spectacular view of such noted sights as the Berlin Cathedral, the Museum Island and the Centrum Judaicum with its golden-domed Synagogue.

If you have the time to take the S-1 to Potsdam, once the home of Prussian rulers and the site of the Potsdam Conference between Stalin, Truman and Churchill in 1945 (a small palace that has been turned into a micro-brewery restaurant), you can also enjoy a boat ride on the Havel River and through the nearby lakes. As the tour guide points out the various palaces set along the river and lake banks she'll also indicate where fences once stood separating East from West to prevent East Germans from getting too close to the water's edge and a possible escape attempt. If one tower set overlooking the water looks particularly familiar that's because it is an exact copy of Frankfurt's Eschenheimer Turm.

Nearby Potsdam

Visitors to Potsdam won't be disappointed. The town

which dates back to the 13th century is full of historical structures including the towering Nikolaikirche, former Town Hall, Sanssouci palace complex and former Prussian military buildings. Outside one former military structure



Sightseers go for a boat ride on the Spree River past the Berlin Cathedral. The church, which was damaged during Allied bombing raids in World War II, was repaired starting in 1975 and reopened for church services in 1993.

stands a statue of Baron Von Steuben, born in nearby Magdeburg, who helped Gen. George Washington train the fledgling American Army during the Revolutionary War after serving Frederick II.

Having escaped major damage through the course of the war, the city was bombed near the war's final days during a British bombing raid.

Potsdam visitors might also consider a visit to the Babelsberg film studios,

former home of the German motion picture industry, which now features a film theme park.

Whether you travel to Berlin to simply hang out in one of the unique music clubs in the Kreuzberg district, to visit the Checkpoint Charlie Museum to learn more about the Cold War era or to explore any of a host of fascinating museums you won't be disappointed.

Children and the scientific-minded of all ages will

especially enjoy the German Technical Museum and Spectrum. Located near the Möckernbrücke U-bahn station, the first thing one notes is a Berlin Airlift-era aircraft hanging high over the modern museum facility. Spread out over several buildings, the museum features an original train yard, more interactive exhibits than any child can possibly manage in one visit, windmills, a working brewery, ship models, vintage cars and more.

A voucher is available in the Welcome Card booklet offering a discount off the €4.50 for adults and €2.50 for children admission charge. Give yourself plenty of time for a visit as you will have to drag the young ones out of this museum.

Berlin has changed immensely since its origin as a sleepy village that merged with another village, Kölln, in the early 14th century to become the capital of the German Empire in 1871. Over its



The victory column shines golden over Berlin. Photo left: new corporate buildings loom over Potsdamer Platz.



Visitors line up to take a look at the glass-domed interior of the Reichstag. Photo left: a couple enjoys ice cream sundaes at an outdoor cafe in Potsdam.



Shoppers and sightseers make their way past artists on the Kurfürstendamm, Berlin's premier shopping district.

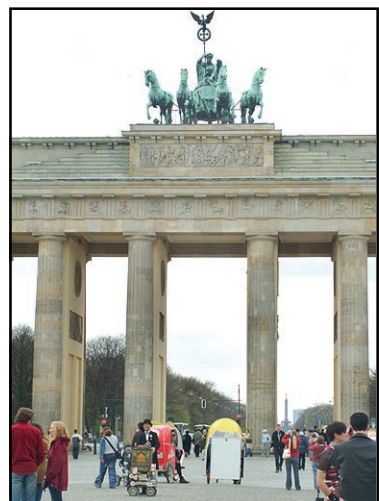


Photo left: Berlin citizens and visitors stroll down the former East German boulevard of Unter den Linden to pass under the Brandenburg Gate.

turbulent history it has seen occupation by Austrian, French, Russian, British and American troops. With the reunification of Germany, Berlin is once again one of the most important and compelling cities in Europe. It's certainly one city that gave this writer plenty to talk about with his children on the train ride home.

For more information on planning a trip to Berlin, visit your local library or military travel office.